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ABSTRACT

An instructor's idea of using required e-mail as a communication link with students in the basic public speaking course sprang from his work with Gerald M. Philips in the pioneering reticence program he developed at Penn State University in the 1970s and 1980s. The instructor's focus in teaching a basic communication course has always been more on pre-planning and organizational skills than the mechanics of performance. Two problems seem to consistently surface: learning what difficulties students have in mapping out the logic of the initial structural plan; and identifying and ultimately helping reticent students. For the course, a required e-mail consultation serves as a prelude to assignments. Advantages are that: (1) communication is instantaneous; (2) required e-mail due dates forces students to think out a game plan and preliminaries; (3) e-mail provides teacher and student with a visible record of the exchange; (4) e-mail has the quality of anonymity and privacy that makes it more likely students will be forthcoming about their fears and concerns relative to upcoming assignments; and (5) e-mail can function as a cyber-suggestion box. Flaws include students failing to respond and teachers being overwhelmed with e-mail. E-mail has proven to be a satisfying way to create a bond of communication with students, especially reticent students. (Appendixes contain the syllabus and a series of e-mail exchanges.) (RS)

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ED 416 543

E-MAIL BONDING: MAKING THE MOST OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TEACHER AND STUDENT

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CS509740

Presented at the National Communication Association Annual Meeting. Chicago, November, 1997.
"Great Ideas for Teaching Speech" Program

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PROLOGUE

The idea of using required e-mail as a communication link with students in the basic public speaking course springs from my work with Gerald M. Phillips in the pioneering reticence program he developed at Penn State University in the 1970s and '80s. As an instructor in the program, I worked first-hand with students who thought themselves unusually fearful about talking in public.

Phillips viewed reticence as a situational circumstance rooted ultimately in a lack of communication skills. His thinking was that carefully planned external behavior would successfully modify internal feelings. His take on reticence is summed up in the following statements culled from the opening chapter of his book, *Help for Shy People*. "Shy people," wrote Phillips, "lack skill at talking with others...We call shy people reticent because that word contains less social prejudice. Reticent people have a choice to speak or be silent...They simply have not learned how to talk well enough with others, and they have decided it is probably not worth the effort to try...Shy people fear the judgments others will make of them. Rather than risk a negative judgment, they do not try...Shy people can learn to make choices and they can learn ways to execute those choices." (*Help for Shy People*. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1981. pp. 6-8.)

The Phillips program at Penn State offered shy students the unique option of enrolling in a specialized section of the required basic public speaking course.

Each class member would be someone who had voluntarily come forward, acknowledged they had debilitating fears about communicating publicly, and expressed a willingness to work on the problem.

The obvious difficulty in a program of this nature was enticing students to come forward to talk about their fears. By nature, reticent individuals would be those *least* likely to want to volunteer information about their concerns. The key was to devise avenues of approach that minimized perceived self-risk for those persons. Furthermore, this approach would have to be carried out for the duration of the course. This was accomplished through a number of devices that had in common an element of anonymity.

The process began across the board on the first day of class. Instructors in all sections were directed to discuss communication fears in a general way. Following that discussion, they let students know that if the description fit them, there were some people they could go and talk to any time throughout the day at their convenience.

Those people were Dr. Phillips and others like myself who taught in the program. For the first few days of the semester we waited in an office for any student who found the courage to walk through the door. Quite a few came forward. After a brief conversation, those students, if they chose and with the concurrence of the interviewer, could enroll on the spot in a specialized section geared to teaching skills that would help them learn to manage communication fears. Though not truly anonymous, the open-ended invitation to discuss options

spared students from revealing their fearfulness to others in the orignal classroom. The device was successful in getting shy students to come forward.

Once enrolled, other low risk methods of creating a communication bond between teacher and student had to be employed. The most important was a first assignment in the form of a non-graded paper, a kind of "rambling" titled "My Self as a Communicator." In it, students were asked to describe frankly and specifically past communication experiences they thought might have some bearing on their current fears.

After a thorough reading, we instructors set up a meeting with the student. At that meeting, teacher and student would map out a strategy for the course based on the paper's content and the needs of the individual. Each student would have a personalized series of communication goals that would have to be accomplished over the course of the semester.

In essence, the "self-as-a-communicator" paper functioned as a kind of open diary. During the writing phase, it afforded privacy that allowed shy students to "talk" about their problems with no one present. It minimized the usual risks they associated with public communication. In other words, they could say on paper what they would not otherwise say in a more public face to face situation.

There were other similar devices used throughout the duration of the course. In every case, the principle was the same: To open up channels of low risk communication between teacher and student. These communication links

were essential in determining the direction skill training would take in order to help students better manage fear. This was the strategy I brought with me when I left the reticence program to teach the basic public communication skills course.

The Problem

Teaching a basic course at a large state university consistently has me working with a general cross section of students, twenty-five per class, enrolled because the course is required. My approach is informed by Phillps' idea that planned external behavior can modify internal perceptions and feelings. To that end, my focus has always been more on pre-planning and organizational skills than the mechanics of performance. Students who master the techniques of structural planning and content choice, I teach, have the best chance of succeeding in the realm of professional communication and in my classroom. Given the emphasis on pre-planning, I have found that the more one-on-one consultations between students and myself, the better the results.

As I've taught over the years, two problems seem to consistently surface.

One is learning what difficulties some students are having in mapping out the logic of the initial structural plan. Even though students are urged when they are having difficulties to set up a meeting with me, many do not take the initiative. Ironically, these are often the ones having the most difficulty. In other instances, though, some simply put off planning until it is too late for an effective consultation. I am seeing their work for the first time in the classroom and for a

grade. A timely meeting before the assignment due date might have made a crucial difference in my evaluation.

The other problem has to do with identifying and ultimately helping reticent students. In my current situation, there is no specialized reticence program to fall back on. I have to work with reticent students within the context of the regular course and in a way that does not direct attention to them and their fears.

I also soon learned that some of the students who I thought were simply procrastinating were among the most fearful and, therefore, shy about setting up a meeting with me. They chose to play their cards close to the vest and take their chances in the classroom.

Over the years, I have tried dealing with these problems in a number of ways. I ask students, for example, to fill out a form circling a number one through ten that indicates their fear about public communication. I have used class time a week prior to assignment due dates to ask each student how they plan to approach the subject matter. I have also required face-to-face meetings as a prelude to speaking assignments. While these methods helped, a number of students still managed to fall through the cracks. I needed a timely sure-fire way to get to those people who procrastinated, especially those who did so out of fear. With the rapid evolution of computer availability on campus and student e-mail accounts, I realized that electronic communication might provide the bond

of communication I needed. It combined instantaneousness with the risk-cutting factors of the devices I had once employed in teaching in the reticence program. I began experimenting with requiring e-mail contact as a prelude to each classroom assignment.

OUTCOMES

In general, required e-mail has worked well as a bond of communication between students and myself. I have incorporated it into my syllabus for the past four semesters. The results have been gratifying.

The advantages of required e-mail consultation as a prelude to assignments have been:

1. Communication is instantaneous. Not only can a teacher respond to a student soon after receiving a post, but the response can be on-going, in the best of circumstances becoming a true exchange *in writing* about problems a student might be having. The exchange can be continuous until the student feels more certain of how to proceed. In addition, with a modem, a teacher can be available to students for advice even at times when they can not be on campus. This has been particularly helpful with reticent students who may want to check in with the teacher the night before an assignment is due.

2. Required e-mail due dates force students to think out a game plan and preliminaries soon enough for the teacher to make recommendations they can act on. Also, a teacher can catch a situation where there might be a lot of

confusion early enough that a face-to-face meeting for a more in-depth discussion can be arranged.

3. E-mail provides teacher and student with a visible record of the exchange. Too often when discussion between teacher and student is limited to only talk, neither party can be certain the message has been understood. With the exchange in print, including the student's planning and the teacher's response, both stand a better chance of being understood. The teacher can provide as extensive a response as required by the student. And students especially like the idea of leaving the conference with personalized guidelines on paper that can be followed later on during the planning process.

4. E-mail has that quality of anonymity and privacy that makes it more likely students will be forthcoming about their fears and concerns relative to upcoming assignments. Students who might be unwilling to schedule a face-to-face appointment with a professor seem more willing to communicate electronically. Furthermore, the e-mail exchange makes possible more frequent communication and the ability of teacher to more closely monitor the concerns and progress of reticent students. The teacher can stay in close touch with a student in regard to planning and confidence issues as well. E-mail provides a means of administering an electronic "pep talk" and making the teacher a real supportive presence throughout the process.

5. E-mail can function as a cyber-suggestion box. It can open up the response channel that is too often absent in the exchange between teacher and

student. While teachers have ample opportunity to connect with students, rarely do students have as easy a channel of access to teachers. E-mail can provide that avenue of communication.

Required e-mail is not, however, without its flaws.

In spite of making electronic communication a requirement of the course, a few students still do not respond. Of the approximately three hundred students I have worked with over the past two years, less than ten have failed to comply. Most of the time, these are students who are simply not taking any of their coursework responsibilities seriously.

In a few cases, however, failure to respond is more a result of a kind of computer reticence. Some students have resisted learning how to use the computer and choose not to access their e-mail accounts. This circumstance seems to surface more with older non-traditional students. In one extreme instance, for example, a middle-aged student was so averse to computers that she dropped the course rather than be required to communicate through e-mail. I would have been happy to work out an alternative with her, but she quit the course before I learned of her discomfort. Since then, I have made it clear that anyone with concerns about electronic communication should let me know in advance so alternatives can be worked out.

Another difficulty with required e-mail is that teachers can be overwhelmed with in-coming messages that require a modicum of depth in response. For example, a teacher with seventy-five or so students in a given

semester would be hard-pressed to respond with quality to all of them in a siongle day. The solution is to set up an e-mail due date schedule that disperses the load.

IMPLEMENTATION

My syllabus includes my e-mail address. Students are told they will be required to post me prior to each of the three speaking assignments. They are told that the content of the e-mail message along with meeting the deadline will be factored into the final course grade. In my case, ten per cent of the final grade is based on my assessment of student commitment to course work. This includes taking the initiative to schedule meetings, particpating in classroom discussions, thoroughly developing written message plans, and, of course, posting the required e-mail messages.

The due dates for e-mail postings are written into the syllabus (see appendix item "A"). To avoid a flood of messages, I stagger them over the course of particular speaking assignments. At present, there are two due dates for each round of communication exercises. Each round lasts six or seven class meetings. Those speaking in the first three class meetings are directed to post e-mail by no later than the class meeting before the round begins. Those speaking in the last three or for days have a due date that falls in the middle of the round. This staggered schedule has worked well, although I am considering having three e-mail due dates per round to spread the load even more.

Students are told that the more information they put in the post, the more specific and thorough I can be in advising them. They are instructed, however, that the minimum post should provide specific information, namely, a sentence that expresses the message goal, the type of organizational pattern, the key or main points, and a general idea of the content that will support the main points. With this information, I can effectively advise them about how to proceed.

On given due dates, I spend the day responding to student posts. I use the reply function not only to save student addresses on my computer, but to include their original post in my response. To set off my responses, I insert a type set to catch the eye, usually a series like ********, followed by the specifics of my response.

To date, required e-mail has proven to be a satisfying way to create a bond of communication with my students. **In no way is it meant to replace face-to-face meetings**, but it does provide a guarantee that I have had at least some consultation relative to assignments with each and every one of my students.

As to improving the quality of work in the classroom, while the final grade range remains roughly the same, more students at least feel they better understand what I want from them and that I am willing to go the extra mile to maintain contact with them.

Perhaps the most success, however, is with reticent students. In almost every case, they tell me they feel far more at ease about communicating in class.

They leave the course with a spark of self-confidence gained from making successful presentations in class. And, through e-mail, I am able to work more consistently and closely with each of them to insure successful results.

APPENDIX

I have attached a number of items that illustrate e-mail exchanges between students and myself. The following is a key to those items.

Item "A": Syllabus showing inclusion of my e-mail address and staggered dates prior to assignments when student e-mails are due.

Item "B": Initial e-mail expressing fears about talking in class.

Item "C": A series of three e-mail exchanges including the initial message (marked "1"), my response (marked "2"), and the student's response (marked "3").

Item "D": The first of three, an intitial e-mail about communication fear.

Item "E": My response with original attached.

Item "F": A post-assignment "thank you."

Item "G": The first of four, an initial e-mail about communication fear.

Item "H": His response to my queries.

Item "I": His post concerning his second talk in front of the class.

Item "J": A final exchange prior to presenting that second talk in class.

Item "K": My response to a proposed student plan.

SYLLABUS FALL, 1997 ITEM "A"

Dr. Jerry Zolten
Phone: 949-5113 (Voice Mail) E-Mail: jjz1@psu.edu
Office: 134 Arts Bldg. T,Th-- Other times by appointment

****

TH	8-28	Orientation to Course/Introductions
T	9-2	Syllabus/Questions
TH	9-4	An Introductory View of Communication/Residual Messages as Strategy
T	9-9	More on Communication/Three Basic Approaches to Message Packaging
TH	9-11	Four More Approaches to Message Packaging
T	9-16	Beginnings and Endings/The Skill of Planned Extemporization
TH	9-18	---------->>**QUIZ ON MESSAGE PACKAGING**<<----------
T	9-23	**DUE DATE:** E-mail to me a description of your first exercise plan
TH	9-25	**First Communication Exercise** (Packaging a news story)
T	9-30	Continued
TH	10-2	NO CLASS
T	10-7	Concluded/ Strategies of Informing
TH	10-9	Audience Analysis and the Art of Choosing Content
T	10-14	**DUE DATE:** E-mail (those scheduled 16th-23rd) description of plan.
TH	10-16	**Second Communication Exercise** (Explaining what you know)
T	10-21	Continued
TH	10-23	Continued **DUE DATE:** E-mail (those scheduled 28th-6th) second plan.
T	10-28	Continued
TH	10-30	Continued
T	11-4	Continued
TH	11-6	Concluded
T	11-11	Strategies of Persuading
TH	11-13	**DUE DATE:** E-mail (those scheduled 18th-2nd) description of final plan.
T	11-18	**Final Communication Exercise** (Explaining your position)
TH	11-20	Continued
T	11-25	Continued
T	12-2	Continued **DUE DATE:** E-mail (those scheduled 4th-11th) final plan.
TH	12-4	Continued
T	12-9	Continued
TH	12-11	Concluded

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CONTRACTUAL AGREEMENT

NO MORE THAN 2 ABSENCES; MEET ALL DUE DATES; SOUND PRACTICED WHEN YOU TALK; PREPARE IN-DEPTH MESSAGE PLANS; PARTICIPATE IN DISCUSSIONS, AND A "C" IS GUARANTEED.

PRESENTATION ONE--20%, PRESENTATION TWO--30%, EXAM--10%, FINAL PRESENTATION--30%, COMMITMENT TO COURSE (INCLUDES ATTENDANCE, THOROUGHNESS IN WORK, ETC.)--10%.

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kelly [redacted], 07:06 PM 9/5/97 -, SpComm

ITEM "B"

X-Sender: [redacted]@email.psu.edu (Unverified)
Date: Fri, 05 Sep 1997 19:06:56 -0400
X-PH: V4.1@r02n05
To: jjz1@psu.edu
From: kelly[redacted]@psu.edu>
Subject: SpComm

Dr. Zolten,

I'm in your 11:00 SpComm 100 class and I just wanted to let you know that I'm not comfortable speaking in front of people. I'm very shy and not an outgoing person, so it's difficult for me to speak in front of others. Thanks for taking the time to listen and I'll see you in class on Tuesday.

Sincerely,
Kelly[redacted]

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[redacted], 07:47 PM 9/11/97 , Re: sp17

ITEM "C"

X-Sender: [redacted]@email.psu.edu
Date: Thu, 11 Sep 1997 19:47:50 -0400
X-PH: V4.1@r02n02
To: Jerry Zolten <jjz1@psu.edu>
From: [redacted]@psu.edu>
Subject: Re: sp17

3. No I didn't have any negative experiences. It is just a reaction when I talk in front of people. I just blush really easily no matter what I am doing so i hate to give talks in front of people because I am self conscious of my face turning red.

2. At 08:24 AM 9/9/97 -0400, you wrote:
>Hi Jennifer. Thanks for the post and letting me know. Would you be willing
>to post me again going into perhaps why you react as you do. Have you had
>any negative experiences in the past or has anyone in some way said
>something that contributed to your discomfort. I'll check back soon. JJZ
>
>At 11:45 AM 9/5/97 -0400, you wrote:

1. >>Dear Dr. Zolten
>> I am the person in your Speech class that spoke with you about the fear of
>>talking in front of people. I blush easily so when I do speak in front of
>>people I get really red in the face and neck so I get self-conscience about
>>it and I think that's why I hate to do it.
>> Jennifer[redacted]
>>
>>
>
>
>

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[redacted] 02:52 PM 9/17/97 , sp comm sec. 11

ITEM "D"

Date: Wed, 17 Sep 1997 14:52:10 -0700
X-PH: V4.1@r02n07
From: Heather[redacted]@earthlink.net>
To: jjz1@psu.edu
Subject: sp comm sec. 11

Dr. Zolten,

this is my e-mail where I tell you that I am one of those people more afraid of speaking in public than of dying. Big suprise huh! Although I do find myself somewhat able to relax in your class, the thought of standing up their talking to my peers is calls for a tank of oxygen and paramedics standing by, (that's putting it lightly) well you get the idea. I really appriciate your understanding.

stephanie[redacted]

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[redacted] Re: sp comm sec. 11

ITEM "E"

To: Heather [redacted] earthlink.net>
From: Jerry Zolten <jjz1@psu.edu>
Subject: Re: sp comm sec. 11
Cc:
Bcc:
X-Attachments:

Hi Heather! (or is it Stephanie?) Anyway, thanks for checking in. Glad to see you've got a great sense of humor about it. So, how many paramedics should we plan for? Actually, be sure to sign up for the last day. Meanwhile, just go through putting a plan together. Then we'll set up a meeting and talk about how you might be able to go about this task. Does that seem alright?

At 02:52 PM 9/17/97 -0700, you wrote:
>Dr. Zolten,
>
> this is my e-mail where I tell you that I am one of those people
>more afraid of speaking in public than of dying. Big suprise huh!
>Although I do find myself somewhat able to relax in your class, the
>thought of standing up their talking to my peers is calls for a tank of
>oxygen and paramedics standing by, (that's putting it lightly) well you
>get the idea. I really appriciate your understanding.
>
>stephanie [redacted]
>
>

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[redacted], 03:49 PM 10/30/97, sc 11

ITEM "F"

X-Sender: [redacted]@email.psu.edu
Date: Thu, 30 Oct 1997 15:49:19 -0500
X-PH: V4.1@r02n02
To: jjz1@psu.edu
From: Stephanie[redacted]@psu.edu>
Subject: sc 11

hello! I just wanted to thank you for making these speeches easier for me to do. I really appriciate it. As I looked at the class and saw you nod and smile it really encouraged me that I can do this. thanks so much

steph [redacted]

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[redacted]@aol.com, 02:38 PM 9/2/97 -, sp. comm

ITEM "G"

From: [redacted]@aol.com
X-PH: V4.1@r02n07
Date: Tue, 2 Sep 1997 14:38:34 -0400 (EDT)
To: jjz1@psu.edu
Subject: sp. comm

Hi, my name is David [redacted], I am in your sp. comm class on Tues. and thur from 12:30-1:45. You were also assigned as my academic advisor late last semester. I am writing about what you said about being afraid of speaking in public. Everything you said describes me perfectly. Even about not wanting to start conversations with people and going out of my way to avoid situations in which I will have to interact with people. I'm not sure why I feel this way, but I've always had a strong distrust of people and it is probably an extension of that distrust.

I'm not sure what you plan on doing with students like me, but any help you can give in making this class as painless as possible is greatly appreciated.

Thanks,
David [redacted]

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ITEM "H"

From: [redacted]@aol.com
X-PH: V4.1@r02n06
Date: Thu, 4 Sep 1997 14:37:54 -0400 (EDT)
To: jjz1@psu.edu
Subject: Re: sp. comm

In a message dated 97-09-04 13:56:05 EDT, you write:

<< I'm curious, was it easier for you to talk
about this via e-mail than it might have been in person? Also, have you had
any past experiences that might have contributed to your concerns about
public talk? >>

It was easier with email, but it still not a walk in the park. I think
everything is easier over the computer becuase you don't have the awkwardness
of being face to face. I can't think of any specific experiences that made
me afraid of speaking, I've just always been extremely shy and afraid of
peoples reactions toward me.
Again, thanks for the help,
David[redacted]

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[redacted]@aol.com, 02:36 PM 10/14/97, SC12

ITEM "I"

From: [redacted]@aol.com
X-PH: V4.1@r02n08
Date: Tue, 14 Oct 1997 14:36:39 -0400 (EDT)
To: jjz1@psu.edu
Subject: SC12

Hi, David [redacted] here, I have a few questions about our upcoming speech. I'm not scheduled until Oct. 28, so if you have people with more pressing issues, feel free to take all the time you need in replying to this letter.
I was thinking about doing my talk on the show The X-Files. I was originally thinking about doing it on how it has changed our culture, but after today's class I'm thinking that maybe I should gear it more towards why should people watch it in the first place. Most people have a certain idea in their minds about what The X-File sis about, whether they've seen it or not. They think they wouldn't like the show because they're not into all that "UFO stuff".
With the second of my two ideas I could outline basically what the show is about, then try to break some stereotypes that people may have, it would even lend itself to me showing a short clip of one of the humorous episodes. With either idea I choose, I'm still not sure on what blueprint to use.
Classification? I would appreciate any input you could give me with this topic.

Thanks in advance,
David [redacted]

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[redacted]@aol.com, 01:21 PM 10/16/97, Re: SC12

ITEM "J"

To: [redacted]@aol.com
From: Jerry Zolten <jjz1@psu.edu>
Subject: Re: SC12
Cc:
Bcc:
X-Attachments:

At 11:50 AM 10/16/97 -0400, you wrote:
>In a message dated 97-10-16 09:02:12 EDT, you write:
>
><< Also, David, I'm hoping your first experience talking in class worked for
> you. Please let me know how I can help you on this next effort, or do you
> feel you've got the situation in hand? JJZ >>
>
>I don't think I'll need any help with the actual speaking in front of people
>part, since I already got one under my belt, but I'll probably want to stop
>in to have you loook over my stuff when the time gets closer. I'm never sure
>exactly what you want. *****This last intrigues me, David. Can you advise how I might do a better job in that area? Or does it all work out in the end? Let me know at your leisure. JJZ
>
>

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ITEM "K"

To: Tarra Denise [redacted]@psu.edu>
From: Jerry Zolten <jjz1@psu.edu>
Subject: Re: section 12
Cc:
Bcc:
X-Attachments:

At 12:19 PM 11/18/97 -0500, you wrote:
> Mr. Zolten-
>My new RM dealing with the hazing issues at the Citadel is----The women who
>dropped out of the Citadel did so not out of weakness but rather because of
>severe hazing.
>You said to use CONTRAST as my blueprint. But I am not really sure what I
>will be contrasting. Do you think I should contrast the mental and
>physical hazing of some of the women cadets. I am not real clear on how I
>should set the blueprint up and what information to contrast.
****Hi Tarra. The contrast is expressed in your new RM. Not because of weakness but because of hazing. You are contrasting a conception that some people have that weakness made them drop out as compared with your view that hazing was the cause. In your original approach, you were making the assumption that your listeners already understood the controversy of why they dropped out. You were only addressing one side of it. I'm saying that to do this justice, you need to address both sides. On one side, we need a summary of the views of those who attributed dropping out to some weakness or inherent flaws on the part of these women. On the other side, we need your infpormation that severe hazing was the real reason.
Without both sides, you have no issue. Your original idea was a cause-effect. It failed to express a position on an issue. My advice was meant to bring out that issue. Hope you understand what I mean. Keep me posted. JJZ>

> Thank you-Tarra [redacted]
>
>

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